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Externalizing the burden of war: the Obama Doctrine and US foreign policy in the Middle East

ANDREAS KRIEG

When it became obvious in 2014 that the US Air Force was providing indirect air support for Shi'i militias and Iranian advisers in Iraq in the fight against the group known as Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the world was stunned. The United States, it seemed, had come to terms with the fact that, given the rising jihadist threat, Iran and its protégés in Iraq had become potential partners with whom the operational burden could be shared. In reality, the US war against ISIS followed an already well-established US doctrinal approach to security in the Middle East, according to which, if vital US national interests are not directly concerned, the mobilization of partners and allies allows for the sharing of the strategic and operational burden of war. In the aftermath of lengthy and costly operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Obama administration's approach to the Middle East has not been one of disengagement so much as one of shifting engagement. While US strategic interests in the region have arguably not changed, the question is—given the changing geopolitical environment, the US role in it and a new American domestic context: what are the means the US is willing to employ to continue to influence outcomes in the Middle East? Another, more important, question is: what are the consequences of the Obama Doctrine for the standing of the United States in the region?

Alongside political and economic levers of power, the military lever of power retains a prominent role in the United States' toolbox. However, the nature of military action favoured by Obama's White House has been shaped by a decade of military restructuring, oversized defence budgets and public war fatigue. Unlike his predecessor, Obama appears to prefer waging war in the shadows with a light footprint and if possible limited public scrutiny. Externalizing the strategic and operational burden of war to human and technological surrogates has developed into America's preferred way of war under the Obama administration.

This article sheds light on the nature of US engagement in the Middle East under the Obama administration within an altering geostrategic and domestic context. Geostrategically, the United States finds itself at the crossroads in its transition from a bipolar to a seemingly apolar world, in an age of risk¹ where military intervention might have to come preventively, for an indefinite period of

¹ See Christopher Coker, *War in the age of risk* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009).

time, anywhere in the world in defence of peripheral security interests—and in a complex operational environment where the lines between state and non-state actors are blurred. Domestically, the Obama administration's Middle East policy is haunted by the legacy of the Bush era: public war fatigue, austerity measures and military downsizing after long and costly military engagements in the region. Against this strategic backdrop, this article argues that war by surrogate has become a preferred means of protecting US interests in the world, fundamentally redefining the US role *vis-à-vis* partners and adversaries alike. The case-study used here to explore the motivations for US surrogate warfare and its potential risks is the Middle East—a region torn by conflict where the alleged US policy of 'retrenchment'² has become most visible.

At a time when the Obama administration has been accused by political adversaries at home and international partners alike of having neglected the Middle East,³ the article sets out to examine surrogate warfare as a US policy choice across an area stretching from northern Africa over the Levant to the Gulf. In contrast to his harsh critics, this article argues that Obama has been anything but idle when dealing with complex strategic security matters. Rather, the foreign and security policy tools employed by Washington since 2009 are a product of the changing US geostrategic role and its domestic context. Surrogate warfare appears to be the compromise Obama has found as a way of dealing with the Bush legacy and a growing 'apolarization' of international affairs, particularly in the Middle East. Surrogate warfare offers an alternative means of maintaining US influence in the region.

The article begins by introducing the concept of surrogate warfare within both a historical and a contemporary geostrategic context. It then turns to look at the Obama Doctrine and its implications for US foreign and security policy towards the Middle East, moving on to explain why the Obama administration has favoured a policy of externalizing the burden of warfare to surrogates over a direct commitment of US ground troops to the Middle Eastern theatre. In conclusion, the article sheds light on the implications of surrogate warfare for US foreign and security policy in the region.

The concept of war by surrogate

The concept of surrogate warfare in the literature is poorly defined. It relates to the debate about compound and proxy warfare, terms that have been used interchangeably. Surrogate warfare, however, is a wider concept that incorporates aspects of compound and proxy warfare but extends further in drawing on the idea of an RMA ('revolution in military affairs'). Essentially, surrogate warfare

² Daniel W. Drezner, 'Does Obama have a grand strategy? Why we need doctrines in uncertain times', *Foreign Affairs* 90: 4, 2011, p. 58.

³ See 'America and the Middle East: a dangerous modesty', *The Economist*, 6 June 2015; Josef Joffe, 'Obama's "Greta Garbo moment"', *The American Interest* 9: 5, April 2014; Kenneth M. Pollack's remarks during the US Senate hearing on US Middle East policy in US Senate, *Hearing to receive testimony on US Middle East policy* (Washington DC: Alderson Reporting Co., 24 March 2015); 'Marco Rubio: Obama's strategy for the Middle East has backfired', *Washington Post*, 29 May 2015; Stephen Sestanovich, 'The price of pulling back from the world', *New York Times*, 9 Feb. 2014.

describes a patron's externalization, partially or wholly, of the strategic, operational and tactical burden of warfare to a human or technological surrogate with the principal intent of minimizing the burden of warfare for its own taxpayers, policy-makers and military. The term 'surrogate', etymologically deriving from the Latin verb *surrogare* meaning 'to elect as a substitute', in this respect refers to a human or technological substitute deputizing for the patron's own ground forces.⁴ Thus a surrogate does not necessarily substitute for the entire military capability of the patron, as a proxy does, but may do so in respect of only infantry capability, in which case the surrogate acts as a simple force multiplier.

War by surrogate can entail aspects of compound warfare, which Huber defines as degrees of strategic and operational synergy between regular and irregular forces.⁵ In compound warfare, two forces complement each other's efforts by coordinating, on either the strategic or the operational level, the planning and execution of military campaigns. Both parties see cooperation and coordination, even if only marginal, as mutually beneficial since these serve their strategic or operational objectives. Compound warfare moves beyond the concept of proxy warfare as it does not require the patron-proxy or activator-proxy relationship that by definition puts the proxy at the receiving end of a chain of command controlled by the patron or activator.⁶ In compound warfare, the regular and the irregular force operate simultaneously, although with varying degrees of direct coordination and integration, with neither side necessarily following the orders of the other. Thus, in contrast to the patron-proxy relationship, the relations between the regular and irregular fighting forces in compound warfare are more egalitarian. Compound warfare goes beyond the narrow definition of proxy warfare, which for the most part remains a relic of the Cold War, a context within which the patron was defined as a state actor merely exploiting the proxy to advance external objectives in an international struggle with another external state actor.⁷

Set against compound and proxy warfare, surrogate warfare is more of an umbrella concept. Patron and surrogate can be state or non-state actors. Non-state actors can be terrorist organizations, insurgency groups, transnational movements, mercenaries or private military and security companies. Cooperation, coordination or force integration can be direct, indirect or coincidental. The surrogate can be a technological platform that enables the patron to wage war by means more effective, economical or clandestine than the conventional infantry force. Surrogates can employ regular, irregular or hybrid means of warfare, providing the patron with a range of core and niche capabilities.

The idea of using surrogates to externalize the strategic and operational burden of war is nothing new. Like the concepts of asymmetric, irregular or unconventional warfare, war by surrogate has been a constant feature in the history of warfare.⁸

⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*, www.oed.com, accessed 18 Oct. 2015.

⁵ See Thomas M. Huber, 'Compound warfare: a conceptual framework', in Thomas M. Huber, ed., *Compound warfare: that fatal knot* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: US Army CGS College Press, 2002).

⁶ Yaakov Bar Siman-Tov, 'The strategy of war by proxy', *Cooperation and Conflict* 19: 4, 1984, p. 269.

⁷ Karl W. Deutsch, 'External involvement in internal war', in Harry Eckstein, ed., *Internal war* (New York: Free Press, 1964), p. 102.

⁸ Andrew Mumford, *Proxy warfare* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), p. 1.

Romans employed 'barbarian' tribes to multiply their forces, relying on their local knowledge and relations with local populations; the most famous example is that of Arminius, the German chieftain who supplied the Romans with tribal support in the inaccessible terrains east of the Rhine.⁹ The wealthy Renaissance city-states of northern Italy employed the *condottieri*—commercial armed contractors—to protect their wealth from greedy neighbours.¹⁰ In the American Revolution, the British Army multiplied its forces by using 35,000 Hessian mercenaries to fight the hybrid threat of Washington's continental army and colonial militias.¹¹ Wellington owed his success in the Peninsular War against Napoleon's Grande Armée to the support of the Spanish guerrillas attacking the French occupier's lines of communication.¹² The relatively small island nation of Britain was able to rule more than a quarter of the world only by relying on colonial surrogates: twelve political officers, 100 British soldiers and 800 paramilitary surrogates could control 10 million people.¹³ In the early stages of the Second World War, when Britain was far from ready to engage the Nazi threat directly, Churchill envisaged employing continental resistance movements as surrogates to attack the Wehrmacht from the rear.¹⁴ During the Cold War, with the growing need for deniability, the superpowers often resorted to the use of surrogates to achieve strategic objectives overseas, the Soviet support for the Vietcong in Vietnam and the US support for the *mujahideen* in Afghanistan being the most famous examples.

Since the end of the Cold War the use of surrogates has become more widespread, with western powers relying on both manned and unmanned air power and on commercial military contractors, and so-called 'rogue states' supporting terrorist, insurgent, rebel or quasi-volunteer groups.¹⁵ Three factors have made the employment of surrogates an even more attractive course of action in this period: the increasingly apolar nature of the international system; the shift from a threat-based to a risk-based perception of security; and fundamental changes in the operating environment.

First, surrogate warfare is a trend that has to be understood within the context of a paradoxical reshuffling of the global system in which, while the state retains in law the full authority to regulate and manage international affairs, its authority is in practice challenged by non-state actors operating in the global system. In this new apolar system no one actor can dominate an increasingly anarchic environment.¹⁶ Anarchy in this context exceeds the limited realist concept of the international

⁹ James Lacey, 'Conquering Germania: a province too far', in W. Murray and P. R. Mansoor, eds, *Fighting complex opponents from the ancient world to the present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹⁰ P. W. Singer, *Corporate warriors: the rise of the privatized military industry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 22.

¹¹ See Rodney Atwood, *The Hessians: mercenaries from Hessen-Kassel in the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

¹² Max Boot, *Invisible armies: an epic history of guerrilla warfare from ancient times to the present* (New York: Norton, 2013), pp. 82ff.

¹³ John Ferris, 'Small wars and great games: the British Empire and hybrid warfare, 1700–1970', in Williamson Murray and Peter Mansoor, eds, *Hybrid warfare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 201.

¹⁴ Peter R. Mansoor, 'Introduction: hybrid warfare in history', in Murray and Mansoor, eds, *Hybrid warfare*, p. 4.

¹⁵ Ariel I. Ahram, *Proxy warriors: the rise and fall of state-sponsored militia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

¹⁶ Richard N. Haass, 'The age of nonpolarity: what will follow US dominance?', *Foreign Affairs* 87: 3, May–June 2008, pp. 44–56.

system as a leaderless state-centric construct, referring instead to a competitive system that is not international but transnational in nature: that is, it is shaped not exclusively by the territorial integrity and sovereignty of states, but by a dynamic interaction between state and non-state authority across the boundaries of states.

Second, the post-Cold War *Zeitgeist*, characterized by the impermissibility of interstate war¹⁷ and growing conventional deterrence, has prompted states to consider means of achieving strategic objectives other than major combat operations¹⁸—including alternative military options. The ‘everywhere war’¹⁹ of the twenty-first century has fundamentally changed the strategic perspective of states on security and security provision; in this age of risk, the perception of threats is not geographically confined to the direct vicinity of one’s borders. As a consequence, publics in one part of the world see their militaries being deployed in another part of the world in pursuit of interests that are perceived as less than existential—a reality that prompts political and military leaders to externalize the risks of war to communities in the operating theatre. The idea of a ‘riskless war’, as Kahn puts it,²⁰ prompts states, according to Shaw, to engage in ‘risk-transfer’ wars,²¹ whereby the burden of warfare is delegated from the military to the civilian population. The externalization of the burden of warfare to technological surrogates such as manned and unmanned air power is part of this risk transfer. In an effort to minimize the operational risk exposure for service personnel, those personnel are removed from the battlefield—either partially, as in war waged by air strikes alone, or entirely, as in the case of drone warfare.²²

Third, surrogate warfare has to be understood within the changing context of twenty-first-century operating environments, which are shaped, according to Kaldor, by ‘paramilitary units, local warlords, criminal gangs, police forces, mercenary groups, and also regular armies including break away units ... [operating] through a mixture of confrontation and cooperation even when on opposing sides’.²³ The ensuing operational anarchy on the ground necessitates the state’s engagement with these unconventionally fighting actors in war. States rely on non-state actors as proxy warriors in complex environments to achieve degrees of deniability, operational effectiveness and legitimacy in insurgency environments.²⁴ Non-state surrogates provide states with more capable means of achieving objectives cheaply and sustainably.²⁵ Thereby the state’s support for rebel and insurgency groups or terrorist organizations creates the complex operating environment—an

¹⁷ Bruno Tertrais, ‘The demise of Ares: the end of war as we know it?’, *Washington Quarterly* 35: 3, 2012, p. 10.

¹⁸ John Mueller, ‘The obsolescence of major war’, *Security Dialogue* 21: 3, 1990, p. 321.

¹⁹ Derek Gregory, ‘The everywhere war’, *Geographical Journal* 177: 3, 2011, pp. 238–40.

²⁰ Paul W. Kahn, ‘The paradox of riskless war’, *Philosophy and Public Policy Quarterly* 22: 3, 2002, p. 8.

²¹ Martin Shaw, *The new western way of war* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2005).

²² See Michael J. Boyle, ‘The costs and consequences of drone warfare’, *International Affairs* 89: 1, Jan. 2013, pp. 1–29; John Kraag and Sarah Kreps, *Drone warfare* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2014); Leila Hudson, Colin S. Owens and Matt Flannes, ‘Drone warfare: blowback from the new American way of war’, *Middle East Policy* 18: 3, Fall 2011, pp. 122–32.

²³ Mary Kaldor, *New and old wars: organized violence in a global era* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 9.

²⁴ Ahram, *Proxy warriors*, p. 17.

²⁵ Idean Salehyan, ‘The delegation of war to rebel organizations’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 54: 3, 2010, p. 502.

environment in which states struggle to compete when relying solely on their conventional means of force.²⁶

While surrogate warfare, as noted above, is far from a historical anomaly, the reasons and motivations behind the employment of surrogates have changed in recent decades. A patron's propensity to use surrogates depends on a variety of factors: namely, the need to minimize operational and political costs in face of a fading sense of urgency, a lack of adequate capability, and the need for deniability and legitimacy.

The urgency of a crisis is the sum of the political leader's perception of the immediacy of a threat to vital national interests and the potential humanitarian considerations. The former are linked to the more realist components of foreign policy, the latter to its altruistic components. The cost factor comprises the anticipated financial, human and political costs of intervention. In risk transfer wars, surrogates provide the patron with a means of absorbing operational risk on behalf of the patron's service personnel. Political costs refer here to the costs for policy-makers of committing to a crisis in the face of public opinion, which can be either positive or negative, in support of intervention or strongly opposed to it. As public opinion, at least in western democracies, more often than not appears to be opposed to military action,²⁷ costs tend to loom larger than urgency in this factor.

The capability factor sets the availability of the patron's own human capacity to carry out military action against the availability of technological platforms to take the place of that capacity. The more capital-intensive the patron's strategic decision-making, the more ready the patron will be to substitute capital for labour, namely to pay for human or technological surrogates.

The need for deniability is another factor driving patrons to externalize the burden of warfare to surrogates.²⁸ At this time of transnational conflict involving a growing number of non-state actors waging war across borders, it has become increasingly easy for outside state actors to generate an effect on the ground without having to deploy ground troops overtly. Direct or indirect support for non-state actors as surrogates can generate desired effects more covertly.²⁹

Finally, surrogates allow patrons to get involved in insurgency struggles, civil wars or rebellions without losing legitimacy in the eyes of the local civilian population.³⁰ Generating a desired effect indirectly through surrogates who are part of the local socio-political fabric enables the patron to achieve strategic or operational objectives more effectively in a highly populated warfare environment.

²⁶ See Navan Bapat, 'The internationalization of terrorist campaigns', *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 24: 4, 2007, pp. 265–80; Daniel Byman, *Trends in outside support for insurgent movements* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001); Daniel Byman, *Deadly connections: states that sponsor terrorism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

²⁷ Hugh Smith, 'What costs will democracies bear? A review of popular theories of casualty aversion', *Armed Forces and Society* 31: 4, Summer 2005, pp. 487–512.

²⁸ Shaw, *The new western way of war*, pp. 55, 88.

²⁹ Geraint Hughes, *My enemy's enemy: proxy warfare in international politics* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2012), p. 35.

³⁰ Mansoor, 'Introduction', p. 9.

The Obama Doctrine and surrogate warfare

The alleged shift in US foreign policy under Obama since 2009 has been the subject of heated debate. After two terms of expansive US foreign policy under Bush, guided by the belief that the United States had to be able to project force overseas unilaterally in defence of its own and its allies' national interests, Obama's approach to foreign and security policy initially appeared non-interventionist, the administration's attention being directed more towards domestic affairs.³¹ After the devastating experience of two costly wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, with US taxpayers and service personnel carrying the principal burden, Obama was adamant that in a context of austerity and globalization, military action had to be, first, limited to the defence of vital US interests and, second, carried out by a leaner, more flexible military force acting not unilaterally but multilaterally in cooperation with local allies.³² It was not necessarily the objectives of US foreign policy that changed, but rather the means chosen to achieve them.³³

Recognizing 'our [US] limits in terms of resources and capacity',³⁴ Obama's primary strategic approach to foreign and security policy has been driven by the maxim of 'multilateral retrenchment', a principle 'designed to curtail the United States' overseas commitments, restore its standing in the world, and shift burdens onto global partners'.³⁵ Thus, the Obama administration has primarily been trying to maintain its foreign posture by means not solely reliant on military power or presence. Accentuating the need for 'soft power' engagement with allies, partners and adversaries,³⁶ however, does not equate to closing off the option of military action altogether. On the contrary, some would argue that Obama has shown a considerable readiness to use military force³⁷ to protect vital national interests against geographically and legally amorphous threats,³⁸ often ill defined. However, given the complexity of the operating environment and the domestic constraints in play, the use of force employed by the Obama administration has been of a different nature.

The Obama Doctrine is a product of the shifts in the geostrategic environment noted above. There is a realization in Washington that the United States, though a Great Power, is not omnipotent, as a variety of different actors actively seek to undermine the statist foundation of the international system.³⁹ In addition, as the perception of security shifts from a basis in threat to a basis in risk,⁴⁰ and the entire

³¹ James M. Lindsay, 'George W. Bush, Barack Obama and the future of US global leadership', *International Affairs* 87: 4, July 2011, p. 772.

³² Fawaz A. Gerges, 'The Obama approach to the Middle East: the end of America's moment?', *International Affairs* 89: 2, March 2013, p. 301.

³³ Mark E. Manyin, Stephen Dagget, Susan V. Lawrence, Michael F. Martin, Ronald O'Rourke and Bruce Vaughn, *Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama administration's 'rebalancing' toward Asia*, Report for Congress (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 28 March 2012), p. 4.

³⁴ Fareed Zakaria, 'The strategist', *Time*, 30 Jan. 2012.

³⁵ Drezner, 'Does Obama have a grand strategy?', p. 58.

³⁶ Gerges, 'The Obama approach to the Middle East', p. 302.

³⁷ Boyle, 'The costs and consequences of drone warfare', p. 2.

³⁸ The White House, *National Security Strategy* (Washington DC, 2010).

³⁹ See Haass, 'The age of nonpolarity'.

⁴⁰ See Ulrich Beck, *Risk society: towards a new modernity* (London: Sage, 1992); Anthony Giddens, *Consequences of modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990).

concept of security is thereby defined less tangibly and more subjectively, the Obama administration has found it hard to develop a strategic security narrative. Dealing with risks, in an increasingly complex operating environment in which states are pitted against evasive enemies with low-tech capabilities, the Obama administration—like other governments—is confronted with the challenge of preventing or reacting to often ill-defined threats while minimizing the burden of warfare at home.

Obama's Doctrine, questioning the utility of great military power in the twenty-first century, is in fact merely an extension of the Rumsfeld Doctrine, which coined the idea of a 'military lite'—a flexible, responsive and agile military relying on technology and a limited footprint.⁴¹ Apart from new operational requirements in contemporary operating environments, the two most important factors determining the Obama administration's approach to military action have been austerity and an increasingly war-fatigued American public. The latter factor has been shaped by the aftermath of what in hindsight have been defined as 'wars of choice'—the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that involved 2 million servicemen and women, left 6,000 Americans dead and 40,000 wounded, and cost more than US\$1.5 trillion.⁴² The legacy of these conflicts left the Obama administration with few military courses of action to choose from: any military action undertaken had to be off the public radar, cost-efficient and a matter of last resort in protection of vital US national interests. Former Defense Secretary Leon Panetta laid out the implications of this strategic norm for US force structure: 'As we reduce the overall defence budget, we will protect and in some cases increase our investments in special operations forces, new technologies like unmanned systems, space and in particular cyberspace capabilities and in the capacity to quickly mobilize.'⁴³

The consequent force structure blurs the lines between overt and covert operations on the one hand and between Pentagon and CIA operations on the other. As part of the same narrative, the Obama administration has repeatedly stressed the importance of strategic burden-sharing through multilateral approaches to local crises. The point is clearly stated in the National Security Strategy 2015: 'The threshold for military action is higher when our interests are not directly threatened. In such cases, we will seek to mobilize allies and partners to share the burden and achieve lasting outcomes.'⁴⁴

Thus the core principle of the Obama Doctrine is burden-sharing, both strategically and operationally. On the strategic level, it emphasizes the need for collective action through coalition warfare and for capacity-building of local partners and allies.⁴⁵ On the operational level, it prioritizes covert warfare, relying increas-

⁴¹ Nick Turse, *The changing face of empire: special ops, drones, spies, proxy fighters, secret bases and cyber warfare* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2012), p. 2.

⁴² Richard N. Haass, 'The irony of American strategy: putting the Middle East in proper perspective', *Foreign Affairs* 92: 57, June 2013, p. 59.

⁴³ Quoted in Ed Pilkington, 'Barack Obama sets out plans for leaner military in historic strategy shift', *Guardian*, 5 Jan. 2012.

⁴⁴ The White House, *National Security Strategy* (Washington DC, 2015), p. 8.

⁴⁵ The White House, *National Security Strategy* (2015), p. 9.

ingly on technological platforms, special forces operations and CIA operatives to achieve strategic and operational objectives out of the public eye.⁴⁶ Essentially, Obama's foreign policy is one that lays the doctrinal foundation for surrogate warfare: externalizing the burdens of warfare to human and technological surrogates. The post-Iraq US policy towards the Middle East appears to be testimony to the doctrinal shift to waging war by surrogate in the absence of vital national interests.

Responding to insecurity in the Middle East

Since President Obama came into office, US relations with the Middle East have been conducted in the context of the administration's alleged 'pivot towards Asia'. From the outset the administration highlighted the importance of Asia for US national interests in all dimensions. However, that is not to say that a US focus on Asia was ever intended to come at the expense of the US commitment to the Middle East. In fact, Obama's overall grand strategy was not about fundamentally redefining the core objectives of US foreign and security policy but rather about reconsidering how to achieve them.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, the rhetorical accentuation of Asia unsettled many US allies in the Middle East, who feared that after the disengagement from Iraq and Afghanistan the region would be left to its own devices.⁴⁸ In the event, instead of disengaging from the Middle East, the US has changed the nature of its engagement—as it has across the spectrum of conflict in the world at large.⁴⁹

It was the Arab Spring that challenged Obama's strategic approach to the Middle East, suddenly propelling the region back to the top of the US foreign policy agenda. As Haass wrote in 2013: 'Now that most Americans want little to do with the greater Middle East, US officials are finding it difficult to turn away.'⁵⁰ Nonetheless, it is important to note that although key regional partners were affected by the socio-political upheavals in the region, vital US national interests were never at stake before the rise of ISIS in 2014.⁵¹ And even since then, the definition of the ISIS threat appears vague from a US point of view, as both the jihadists' actions and their narratives focus primarily on changing the socio-political authority structure in the region. Consequently, the Obama administration has been wary of getting sucked into the quagmire of leading major combat operations against an organization that is considered to pose a threat mainly to local communities and populations. Thus, while western media have arguably created a threat hype about ISIS,⁵² most analysts and experts, including those in uniform,

⁴⁶ Boyle, 'The costs and consequences of drone warfare', p. 3.

⁴⁷ Manyin et al., *Pivot to the Pacific?*, p. 4.

⁴⁸ Haass, 'The irony of American strategy', p. 64.

⁴⁹ Richard N. Haass and Martin Indyk, 'Beyond Iraq: a new US strategy for the Middle East', *Foreign Affairs* 88: 1, 2009, p. 41.

⁵⁰ Haass, 'The irony of American strategy', p. 59.

⁵¹ Gerges, 'The Obama approach to the Middle East', p. 309.

⁵² Trevor Timm, 'Our media's Isis threat hype machine: government stenography at its worst', *Guardian*, 6 July 2015.

have expressed scepticism about the ISIS threat to US homeland security, aside from the lone wolf phenomenon.⁵³

Thus, with the US security narrative remaining ill defined within the apolar geostrategic environment of the early twenty-first century, US leadership in the Middle East and beyond becomes difficult to measure on the basis of its actions. While rhetorically Middle East stability remains a US priority, US 'leadership from behind' meant that surrogates were empowered to secure strategic and operational objectives in the region that are—at least from an American point of view—peripheral. The externalization of the burden of warfare has thereby been justified by the maxim of letting local partners solve local problems. As Obama has repeatedly stated in one way or another: 'Ultimately, it's not the job of ... the United States to solve every problem in the Middle East. The people in the Middle East are going to have to solve some of these problems themselves.'⁵⁴

The US delegation of authority or burden to partners in the region has taken different shapes and forms, ranging from indirect tacit through indirect explicit to direct support of various state and non-state surrogates. It is worth emphasizing again that the employment of external parties as surrogates for US foreign and security policy is nothing new, dating back as far as the 1950s when the US government used the Central Intelligence Agency to arm, equip and train a force to carry out a *coup d'état* in Guatemala.⁵⁵ Even so, warfare by surrogate has never before been the principal means of securing US interests overseas, as it has been under the Obama administration.

The most indirect form in which the burden of warfare has been delegated to surrogates has been the employment of Iran as a proxy in the war against ISIS in Iraq. While US officials have been adamant that there is no force integration on the operational level,⁵⁶ Iranian operatives of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps under General Soleimani have provided the necessary ground complement to US-led air strikes against ISIS positions in Iraq in 2014 and 2015.⁵⁷

A more direct form of surrogate warfare has been the US military assistance delivered to Arab allies in the Middle East, most notably Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf states.⁵⁸ While the US policy of training, equipping and advising militaries in the Middle Eastern context is decades old, the Obama administration is the first to have relied directly on Arab military capability to contain regional threats. During the NATO-led Libya campaign, the United States provided key capabilities to its allies in the air. At the same time it granted the Qatari and UAE armed forces its

⁵³ See Massimo Calabresi, 'Understanding the ISIS threat to Americans at home', *Time*, 9 Sept. 2014; Conor Friedersdorf, 'David Petraeus on Syria, attacking Iran, and the threat from ISIS', *The Atlantic*, 3 July 2015; Lee Ferran and Rym Montaz, 'ISIS: trail of terror', ABC News, 23 Feb. 2015; Marcus Weisgerber, 'Russia, not ISIS, greatest threat to US, general says', *Defence One*, 14 July 2015.

⁵⁴ 'President Obama continues his news conference on the Iran deal', CNN transcripts, 15 July 2015.

⁵⁵ Loch K. Johnson, 'Intelligence analysis and planning for paramilitary operations', *Journal for National Security Law and Policy* 5: 2, 2012, p. 492.

⁵⁶ Department of Defense, 'Joint press briefing by Secretary Hagel and Japanese Minister of Defense Itsunori Onodera in the Pentagon Briefing Room', news transcript, 11 July 2014.

⁵⁷ Kasria Naji, 'Iran's Revolutionary Guards take lead on foreign affairs', BBC News, 29 Jan. 2015.

⁵⁸ Pieter D. Wezeman and Siemon T. Wezeman, *Trends in international arms transfer 2014*, SIPRI fact sheet (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2015).

tacit approval to train and equip Libyan rebel forces on the ground to operate in conjunction with coalition air power.⁵⁹ The same is true in Syria: Gulf states have been involved in training and equipping Syrian rebel forces in their fight against the Assad regime since 2012.⁶⁰ Here, the Gulf states acted as Washington's surrogate in liaising with the opposition. In the case of Yemen, it was regional allies that carried out Operation Decisive Storm in April 2015, bringing their military capability to bear, with the United States merely providing logistical and intelligence support.⁶¹

The United States has also directly employed non-state actors as surrogates on the ground. In Syria it has trained and equipped units of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and moderate rebel brigades such as the Harakat al-Hazm.⁶² In northern Iraq, US special forces have provided training and support to Kurdish *peshmerga* fighters to act as surrogates on the ground against ISIS militants.⁶³

Technology is another major surrogate for the United States in the Middle Eastern theatre. In an effort to avoid putting boots on the ground, the Obama administration has relied heavily on manned and unmanned air power. In operations in Libya, Syria and Iraq, the US military has externalized operational risks to conventional air power platforms that can eliminate targets with impunity from high altitude. The Obama administration has also massively extended the armed drone programme, with significant effects on US kinetic engagement in the Middle East. Unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs) have become a central feature of US covert operations, providing air cover for special forces on the ground and, more often than not, operating as a stand-alone platform as part of the US counterterrorism strategy.⁶⁴ UCAVs have been deployed in the fight against ISIS in Iraq and Syria,⁶⁵ against the Gaddafi regime in Libya,⁶⁶ against Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen,⁶⁷ and against Al-Shabaab militias in Somalia.⁶⁸

Motivations for Obama's surrogate warfare

The motivation for resort to surrogate warfare by the Obama administration includes all the elements identified above: deniability, legitimacy, urgency, costs and capability.

The most important factor in US decision-making is arguably the relationship between urgency and costs. The multiple crises in the Middle East are perceived

⁵⁹ Ian Black, 'Qatar admits sending hundreds of troops to support Libya rebels', *Guardian*, 26 Oct. 2011.

⁶⁰ Amena Bakr, 'Qatar runs covert desert training camp for Syrian rebels', Reuters, 26 Nov. 2014.

⁶¹ David D. Kirkpatrick, 'Egypt says it may send troops to Yemen to fight Houthis', *New York Times*, 26 March 2015.

⁶² Nancy A. Youssef, 'Syrian rebels describe US-backed training in Qatar', PBS Frontline, 26 May 2014.

⁶³ Joe Parkinson and Dion Nissenbaum, 'US, allies training Kurds on using sophisticated weaponry against Islamic State', *Wall Street Journal*, 21 Sept. 2014.

⁶⁴ Kraag and Kreps, *Drone warfare*, p. 19.

⁶⁵ C. Courtney Kube and Jim Miklaszewski, 'US drone strike hits ISIS firing position in northern Iraq', NBC News, 12 Aug. 2014.

⁶⁶ Julien E. Barnes, 'US launches drone strikes in Libya', *Wall Street Journal*, 22 April 2011.

⁶⁷ Al Arabiya/AFP, 'Seven al-Qaeda suspects killed in Yemen drone strike', *Al Arabiya*, 22 April 2015.

⁶⁸ Turse, *The changing face of empire*, p. 30.

as not urgent enough in terms of vital US national interests and humanitarian considerations to merit intervention on that basis alone. While the Obama administration has rhetorically condemned the humanitarian crises in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, these events have not mobilized sufficient public pressure at home to justify the deployment of US ground troops. At the same time, the anticipated financial and human costs of a joint force intervention in Syria, Iraq and Yemen are considerable.⁶⁹ Taking into account the US public's hostility to major combat operations in the Middle Eastern theatre,⁷⁰ any direct military intervention in these theatres would generate substantial political costs for the administration at home. The key aspect in this respect is perceived public opposition to the use of ground troops, not just because of the financial costs their deployment entails for any US administration but, more importantly, because of the potential political costs arising from the return of dead bodies. It is important to recognize here that US public opinion might shift in favour of sending ground troops into the Middle East in response to changes in threat perceptions.⁷¹ Sensitivity to casualties remains essentially an elite perception of the public response rather than a real reflection of public opinion.⁷² The cost–benefit analysis of the urgency of a crisis as weighed against the anticipated costs of intervention is conducted in policy-making circles and not necessarily in the heads of constituents. It follows that the decision to minimize operational risk for US service personnel cannot be blamed on the US public.

Capability is another factor in the Obama administration's considerations. The reduction of human capacity and the concomitant investment in technology, coupled with a high propensity to substitute capital for labour, make the United States more inclined to externalize operational burdens of war to technological platforms.⁷³ Defence budgets in recent years have reflected a shift away from the human domain to the technological, with investment in technology procurement and research and development rising as troop levels fall.⁷⁴

Deniability has also played an important role in the US administration's decision to employ surrogates. In particular with regard to training opposition forces in Libya and Syria, surrogates in the Gulf, most notably Qatar, have functioned as facilitators, providing arms, money and training to rebel forces. In Libya, Qatar was willing to do this in potential breach of UN Security Council Resolution 1973—with the tacit approval of the United States, which did not want to be seen

⁶⁹ Haass, 'The irony of American strategy', p. 66.

⁷⁰ Mark Landler and Megan Thee-Brenan, 'Survey reveals scant backing for Syria strike', *New York Times*, 9 Sept. 2013.

⁷¹ See Rose T. Buchanan, 'Majority of Americans now support US troops on the ground against Isis', *Independent*, 21 Feb. 2015; Peter D. Hart, 'Boots on the ground: poll shows Americans ready to respond', *Wall Street Journal*, 28 Sept. 2014; 'Voters remain cool to boots on the ground in Iraq', *Rasmussen Reports*, 15 May 2015; David Stout, 'More Americans say boots are needed on the ground to fight ISIS', *Time*, 15 Oct. 2014.

⁷² See Charles K. Hyde, 'Casualty aversion: implications for policy makers and senior military officers', US Naval War College Research Paper (Newport, RI: Naval War College, Feb. 2000).

⁷³ Nick Dobos, 'Justifying humanitarian intervention for the people who pay for it', *Praxis* 1: 1, Spring 2008, p. 41.

⁷⁴ See Lawrence J. Korb, Katherine Blakeley and Max Hoffman, *A user's guide to the fiscal year 2015 defense budget* (Washington DC: Center for American Progress, 24 April 2014).

doing the same itself.⁷⁵ In Syria, the Obama administration was concerned that any direct, open support for Syrian opposition groups would generate public opposition at home. As a 2013 Pew study indicates, Americans have been highly sceptical about a possible direct US military intervention in the Syrian civil war.⁷⁶ Thus, while the US use of Qatar as a surrogate for the pursuit of American foreign and security policy objectives in both crises was not a covert action, it did allow the Obama administration to publicly deny any direct US involvement in the conflict. Even the US training missions for Syrian rebel forces in Qatar remained largely out of the public eye, attracting only marginal media attention—something a direct military intervention with boots on the ground would have been unable to achieve.

Finally, there is the aspect of legitimacy and the idea that local forces are better able to achieve objectives in a highly complex environment where they are more effectively integrated into the local social fabric. US or western ground troops will always be seen as foreign invaders in the Middle East, even if their objectives are humanitarian in nature.⁷⁷ Consequently, surrogates can achieve objectives on behalf of the United States as an external patron without the potentially inflammatory effect of introducing US ground troops.

Thus surrogate warfare appears to provide the Obama administration with a tool that enables it to pursue operational or strategic objectives in low-interest conflicts overseas without having to bear the human, financial and political costs of war.

The consequences of surrogate warfare for US policy in the Middle East

Externalizing the burden of warfare to surrogates has had a range of strategic and operational consequences, some of which could potentially undermine the utility for the United States of this alternative means of engaging in warfare in the Middle East. Contrary to Mumford's assertion that surrogate warfare is a low-risk alternative to the direct intervention of the patron,⁷⁸ a state with the ambition of being a superpower may face the risks of losing control and oversight, escalating crises, undermining its own long-term interests and, most importantly, jeopardizing its strategic and moral reputation.

First, the reliance on surrogates involves the delegation of authority and action to substitutes, who have the discretion to use the delegated authority as they see fit. Patrons have very few means available to them to exercise direct control or oversight over the surrogate. Regardless of the degree of cooperation between patron and surrogate on the strategic or operational level, surrogates are ultimately autonomous actors who always have an agenda of their own to pursue⁷⁹—an

⁷⁵ Sam Dagher, 'Tiny kingdom's huge role in Libya draws concern', *Wall Street Journal*, 17 Oct. 2011.

⁷⁶ Richard Drake, 'US aid to Syrian rebels: public has opposed American involvement in the past', Pew Research Center, 14 June 2013, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/06/14/u-s-aid-to-syrian-rebels-public-has-opposed-american-involvement-in-the-past/>, accessed 18 Oct. 2015.

⁷⁷ Stephen M. Walt, 'Do no (more) harm', *Foreign Policy*, 7 Aug. 2014.

⁷⁸ Mumford, *Proxy warfare*, p. 42.

⁷⁹ Erica D. Borghard, 'Proxy war can have dangerous consequences', *Washington Post*, 25 July 2014.

agenda which may overlap only marginally with US foreign policy. Some US surrogates of recent years, such as the Gulf states, can be seen to have pursued their own agendas, either only partially supporting US policy or at times even contradicting it. While there may have been agreement on the overall strategic objectives in Libya, Syria or Yemen, Gulf partners might disagree with the United States about the means of achieving them.⁸⁰ The same is true for non-state actors. Rebel and opposition forces in Syria or Iraq are not serving the US agenda but pursuing their own domestic goals, which might ultimately undermine US long-term interests. The historical precedents of US support for the Saddam regime in Iraq and the *mujahideen* in Afghanistan provide ample reason for caution in this respect.

Second, surrogate warfare often does not allow for direct operational integration and coordination. As a consequence, operations are not conducted with a high degree of synergy.⁸¹ This is particularly true for operations between patron air power and surrogate ground forces. In the case of Iraq, where Shi'i militias supported by Iranian advisers serve as indirect force multipliers for US air power, operational effectiveness is undermined by the lack of force integration and direct communication. In Libya, too, the initial lack of synergy between coalition air operations and surrogate ground operations posed a major obstacle to a swift victory.⁸²

Third, surrogates bear the risk of prolonging the conflict by either escalating the situation or merely tipping the balance of power in the wrong direction.⁸³ Money, commodities and arms provided by the patron, particularly to non-state surrogates, might be diverted into the hands of individual strongmen, tribal, rebel or ideological leaders attempting to strengthen their personal standing *vis-à-vis* partners and competitors. Widespread corruption fuels war economies, where the primary interests of key local actors might not be a swift solution of the conflict but power and control over resources. For example, US lethal and non-lethal aid to the Syrian National Council and FSA has been diverted to build institutional patrimonies rather than translated into operational effectiveness on the ground.⁸⁴ Much of the US military aid provided to Egypt or Yemen has been used by regimes to bolster authoritarian control by paying off key protégés in the military, with little actually spent on enhancing capability.⁸⁵ Hence, by escalating existing conflicts or indirectly fuelling underlying causes of conflict, support for surrogates can bring the risk of the United States having to get involved militarily itself to stop a conflict that an unsuccessful policy of surrogate warfare has exacerbated. The US policy of backing the regime in Baghdad in its fight against ISIS and Sunni

⁸⁰ Ibrahim Al-Amin, 'Gulf states and Turkey going all-out against Syria', *Al-Akhbar* (English), 6 June 2012.

⁸¹ Huber, 'Compound warfare', pp. 5ff.

⁸² David Sloggett, *The RAF's air war in Libya: new conflicts in the era of austerity* (London: Pen & Sword, 2012), p. 84.

⁸³ See David E. Cunningham, 'Blocking resolution: how external states can prolong civil wars', *Journal of Peace Research* 47: 2, 2010, pp. 115–27.

⁸⁴ David W. Lesch, *Syria: the fall of the house of Assad* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 168.

⁸⁵ See Government Accountability Office, *US assistance to Yemen: actions needed to improve oversight of emergency food aid and assess security assistance* (Washington: GAO Reports to Congress, 2013).

insurgency meant that Iranian-backed militias have de facto become indirect tacit surrogates of Obama's Iraq policy. Not only have these surrogates exacerbated the conflict on the ground, they have caused the US to gradually augment its troop presence in Iraq—thereby causing the patron to get sucked back into the war.⁸⁶

Fourth, the employment of technological surrogates has undermined US strategy. In particular, the drone programme, which has been expanded under the Obama administration, has had adverse results in theatre. The targeted killing of suspected insurgents and terrorists from the air, jeopardizing the lives of civilians with limited host state supervision, has created widespread public antagonism towards the United States in fragile insurgency environments.⁸⁷ The consequent loss of hearts and minds not only increases the social base of insurgents and terrorists but, worse, weakens the local authority structure in already failing states.⁸⁸ In Yemen and Pakistan in particular, US overreliance on UCAVs has worked against the overall US counterterrorist and counter-insurgency strategy respectively.

Finally, surrogate warfare in the Middle East has had a less than positive impact on the strategic reputation and moral standing of the United States in the world.⁸⁹ On the strategic side, the US under Obama has lost its ability to deter or coerce players in the region—thereby undermining its claim to global superpower status.⁹⁰ Partners and potential adversaries alike have lost faith in its ability and willingness to do what is necessary to directly protect and secure its interests in the region. Most notably, partners in the Arabian Gulf and Israel, who have traditionally looked to the United States as an external protector, fear that Obama's policy rationale of delegation through the empowerment of surrogates will leave them having to cater for their own security independently.⁹¹ This lack of trust in the reliability of US protection has triggered arms races in the Gulf and a surge of right-wing, paranoid, security-focused policies in Israel. Surrogate warfare has also detracted from the United States' moral standing. Both human and technological surrogates have generated effects that are questionable under the laws of armed conflict or in some instances may even constitute war crimes. US manned and unmanned air power has occasionally killed civilians indiscriminately, while Shi'i militias and Libyan and Syrian rebels have been involved in gross human rights abuses.⁹²

Overall, then, surrogate warfare has come at an immense cost for the United States' standing in the world in general and the region in particular. While it has enabled the US to exercise limited regional influence at low cost politically, financially and in terms of lives, it has fatally damaged its claim to be a superpower

⁸⁶ Peter Baker, Helene Cooper and Michael R. Gordon, 'Obama looks at adding bases and troops in Iraq, to fight ISIS', *New York Times*, 11 June 2015.

⁸⁷ Hudson et al., 'Drone warfare', p. 127.

⁸⁸ Boyle, 'The costs and consequences of drone warfare', p. 3.

⁸⁹ Hughes, *My enemy's enemy*, p. 47.

⁹⁰ Andreas Krieg, 'Is America's reign as a superpower ending?', CNN, 31 Dec. 2014.

⁹¹ Frida Ghitis, 'Obama, Arab nations dance to different tunes', CNN, 15 May 2015.

⁹² Human Rights Watch, *Iraq: militias escalate abuses, possibly war crimes*, Human Rights Watch Report, 15 Feb. 2015; Peter Bouckaert, 'Libya: apparent execution of 53 Gaddafi supporters', Human Rights Watch Report, 23 Oct. 2011; Human Rights Watch, 'You can still see their blood': executions, indiscriminate shootings, and hostage taking by opposition forces in Latakia countryside, Human Rights Watch Report, 10 Oct. 2013.

able and willing to use all means necessary to shape the outcome of events on a global scale. As a democracy held accountable by its own liberal legacy and as the world's largest economy, the United States might be rendered more vulnerable by the resort to surrogate warfare as the principal means of protecting its interests than other great, regional or small powers. The loss of control and oversight, the inability to shape conflicts directly and the failure to develop sustainable and reliable long-term strategies for US national interests have undermined the position of the United States as the leading power in an increasingly apolar world.

Conclusion

The externalization of the burden of war to surrogates as substitutes for a power's own ground troops is a constant in the history of warfare, dating back to ancient times. What have changed are the reasons and motivations for the use of surrogates. It is no longer just the need for deniability or the lack of capacity that prompts the resort to surrogates. Especially in the case of western powers, surrogate warfare today is a response to a perceived misfit between the urgency and the costs of military intervention.

In the United States, surrogate warfare has its roots in the proxy wars of the Cold War, the post-Iraq rethink about US strategy and military capability, and the increasing possibilities provided by the RMA. In an apolar globalized world, where local conflicts have global implications just as global conflicts have local implications, the United States remains the most powerful player, economically, politically and militarily. However, in relative terms US power is diminishing as austerity requires budgets to be tighter, the American people call for commitments closer to home, and operational environments become more complex. All these factors have prompted the United States to explore new means of achieving strategic or operational objectives in conflicts overseas while minimizing the burden for American taxpayers, policy-makers and the military.

The effects of Obama's policy rationale of 'leading from behind'—or, more accurately, leading out of the public eye, has been particularly visible in the Middle East, where the upheavals of the Arab Spring have further destabilized an already conflict-ridden region. State and non-state actors have become direct or indirect US surrogates of war, providing security locally with limited direct US involvement. Decades of military aid, equipment and training have been put to the test as regional partners have been asked to live up to the role for which they have been groomed for decades: maintaining regional peace and security. Rebel movements and militias have been trained to act as surrogates providing the necessary capability on the ground to complement US air power. High-tech platforms have provided the punch where human surrogates were either absent or deemed unreliable.

As a result, the role of the United States in the Middle East has been defined by absence—an absence particularly marked after two decades of direct engagement beginning with the First Gulf War. Regional partners have begun to question US

superpower status, now that it seems unable to act as a global hegemon to influence outcomes in the region. While the United States remains a Great Power, including in the Middle East, it has reached the end of its hegemonic control. America has shifted from being a guarantor of security or a protector to being a partner, assisting local surrogates to take over responsibility to provide security in their own backyard. As long as these surrogates are able to contain threats locally with no or little direct effect on vital US national interests, the United States might accept less than optimal outcomes in return for the benefit of not having to bear the burden of military operations that in Washington are perceived as other people's wars.⁹³

Further research is needed to determine how surrogate warfare is most likely to shape the United States' credibility as the world's only superpower, particularly in other parts of the globe. In an increasingly post-Westphalian world characterized by state and non-state apolarity, the notion that one hegemon can monopolize global power seems archaic. Yet in Asia the United States is trying to retain its superpower status against adversaries such as China, which themselves have explored new means of furthering their interests without resorting to major combat operations. It remains to be seen how the United States will try to secure its position in such regions, where state power is not in such stark decline as in the Middle East. The alternative to surrogate warfare, if any, might be surrogate diplomacy, with the United States relying on allies such as Japan to engage diplomatically with China on Washington's behalf. A grand strategy of delegation, which allows the continued exercise of influence, even if not with the same decisiveness as local partners would like to see, might not be exclusive to the United States, let alone to the Obama administration. Similarly, given the geopolitical context, surrogate warfare might be not just the US long-term response to apolarity, state failure and the rise of non-state actors but that of the state more generally. Investigation of the potential consequences of such developments for the structure of state authority lies beyond the scope of this article.

⁹³ Haass, 'The irony of American strategy', p. 66.

